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ABSTRACT

Unpaid community activities have been widely recommended as learning experiences for adolescents. An evaluation was conducted of two community action learning programs, one which placed adolescents one-to-one in adult-dominated settings and the other which gave adolescents a group project to plan and carry out with adult assistance. Both programs appeared to have parental support and to give participants the cpportunity to form close relationships with adults. The Experience-Based Career Education and Executive High School Intern Programs placed adolescents in work settings without pay for extended periods of time. Evaluations of these programs by several investigators found similar patterns of strong support from parents and participants without strong objective evidence of learning. Findings support the need for a more differentiated approach to learning in the community than has been taken in the past, and suggest that such learning should be viewed as complementary to classroom learning rather than as a replacement, and that unpaid experiences can offer some kinds of opportunities not usually found in jobs that are open tc adolescents. (Author)

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Community Experiences: Contributions to Adolescent Learning and Intellectual Development

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The community experiences discussed in this paper are those occurring in what I will call "community action learning programs." These experiences occur under the auspices of a school or other educational organization. I will not consider "nonsponsored" experiences of adolescents in the adult community because little is known about their impact and because recent recommendations for secondary school reform (e.g., Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education, 1979) have called for programmatic community experiences. I will also exclude paid work experience.

The critical question will be what effects participation in such programs has on adolescents' learning and intellectual development. Learning will be defined broadly to include attitude changes as well as the acquisition of new knowledge and skills. I shall use two community action learning programs I have studied to illustrate some of the ways in which adolescents can be involved in their communities and to present what I consider to be key issues in the assessment of their contributions to learning. I will then explore these issues further with reference to other research.

Types of Community Action Learning Programs

Several typologies have been proposed for experiential learning programs, of which community action learning programs may be considered a large subset. (See Conrad and Hedin, 1977; Miguel, Jipp, Twarog, and Wasson, 1979; and Hamilton, 1980.) In my view one of the most important distinctions among programs is whether adolescents are placed as individuals in adult settings or function as a group in a setting where adolescents are predominant. There are clearly important issues of program design that hinge on these characteristics and the learning opportunities presented by programs differing along these dimensions are likely to vary in important ways. The Learning Web and the Idyllic Foundation illustrate these differences.

The Learning Web, located in Ithaca, New York matches young people who wish to learn a skill with adults who are willing to teach that skill. The young people are called "apprentices," and are expected to so some routine work in exchange for the opportunity

to learn from their "mentors." Placements include such fields as veterinary medicine, printing, auto repair, meat cutting, electronic music, botanical research, and counseling. Some participants use the Learning Web to explore careers, but its founders had broader aims. Drawing inspiration from Illich (1970), who advocated informal "learning webs" as an alternative to conventional schools, and from Dewey (1916, 1938) and Freire (1970), they hoped young people would learn how to take responsibility for their own learning in addition to learning a skill and forming a relationship with an adult. They also hoped the adult mentors would broaden their conceptions of themselves and their abilities and that the community as a whole would develop a greater appreciation of its own resources.

The Idyllic Foundation in Cazenovia, New York, is patterned closely after Foxfire, a program made famous by its magazine and a series of best selling anthologies. Its founder, Eliot Wigginton, has written an excellent description and analysis of the program (1975) that explains its purposes and procedures insightfully. That document presents the highest aspirations of the Idyllic Foundation, which also produces a magazine of local history, folklore, and crafts, and has involved young people in several other activities, notably constructing log cabins using traditional methods. Various documents related to the Idyllic Foundation present a long list of purposes including increased appreciation of older people and the heritage of the community, increased self-confidence and skills, improved ability to work with others, and reduced problematic behavior.

Learning Web participants work one-to-one with their mentors. The placements, as the examples illustrate, are in settings where adults are engaged in activities they would be doing even if their apprentices were not present. In the Idyllic Foundation, in contrast, adolescents are engaged in activities directed toward goals they have set themselves. If they did not write magazine articles or build log cabins, those activities would not occur.

Each of these program types has distinctive advantages. The Learning Web achieves the goal of giving adolescents a place in the adult world and a working relationship with a caring adult who is neither a school teacher nor a parent. Like other programs that

place adolescents individually in adult settings, the Learning Web responds to the concern that adolescents spend too much time in peer groups and need more exposure to the socializing influence of adults and adult-dominated settings (Coleman, 1972; Bronfenbrenner, 1974). The Idyllic Foundation and other programs in which adolescents work with each other on projects they set for themselves take advantage of the attractiveness and the power of peer groups. They give adolescents opportunities to take responsibility and make decisions at a level that is not usually attainable in an adult-dominated setting (National Commission on Resources for Youth, 1975). Group projects also call for group decision making, an important skill for adolescents to practice and learn.

In addition to these differences between the two programs, there is considerable variation within each program in what participants do. The experience of a young woman who is a pianist and composer working with an electronic music group is very different from that of a learning disabled young man apprenticed to a butcher. Even in the Idyllic Foundation, where all participants share in the tasks associated with producing a magazine, some specialize in photography, others in management. This variation among participants in the same program is an important characteristic of community action learning programs that distinguishes them from classroom situations where all are presented with the same stimuli and expected to respond in similar ways.

A slight digression is in order at this point to introduce Dewey's (1938) definition of experience as having both objective and internal components. The objective component includes all that is outside the person: the physical environment, social interaction, the information and skills involved. The internal component - what each person brings to the experience - includes predispositions, previous experiences, and expectations for the future. Each person experiences the same objective conditions differently and learns different things from them because of the unique combination of internal conditions he or she carries. Dewey claims that one of the greatest strengths of progressive education is that it takes account of the internal states of learners, unlike traditional education, which operates on the assumption that all who are exposed to the same objective conditions, a classroom lecture, for example, can learn the same things.

I have just noted some of the differences in objective conditons between and within two community action learning programs. Taking into account differences in the internal states of participants in those programs makes it seem unlikely that participants would learn the same things. However, the uniformity of participant learning depends in part on which learning one examines. While it seems apparent from observation that "Barbara," who became a competent photographer and darkroom technician in the Idyllic Foundation gained more knowledge and skills related to photography than "Roger," whose chief contribution to the program was devising a system for recording participants' attendance and reporting it to the high school, there might be a more general type of learning that they both gained. Both Roger and Barbara might have increased their self-confidence and gained greater appreciation for older people, for example. In these instances, learning is in the affective domain, and as the results reported below indicate, this is the kind of learning that has been found in studies of community action learning programs.

Effects of the Learning Web and Idyllic Foundation

My exploratory study of the Learning Web and Idyllic Foundation was not designed to produce clear evidence of participant learning, but it yielded two suggestive findings. The first had to do with participants' relations with adults. The second came from parents' statements about the programs' benefits to their children.

A comparison group was obtained for the Learning Web participants by taking a random sample of Ithaca High School students who were not in the Learning Web. Since some of those selected in this manner chose not to take part in the study, the sample that was actually interviewed was not totally random, but it did represent a slice of the population from which Learning Web participants are drawn and allowed a comparison between responses of participants in the Learning Web and those of a reasonably representative sample of high school students who had not chosen to participate in the program.

One of the questions asked of participants in the two programs and the comparison group was, "Who are the five most important adults in your life?" The intent of the

questions was to tap the extent to which these programs put young people in touch with adults, thus compensating for one of the failures identified in conventional socialization processes.

Our expectation that most respondents would name their parents or guardians first was borne out. The most frequently mentioned category of adults other than parents was other relatives: older siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles. What was most striking, though it is consistent with the claim that today's adolescents are isolated from adults, was that more than half of the respondents could not name five adults who were important to them. We interviewed 38 young people (11 Learning Web, 13 Idyllic Foundation, 14 Comparison). Each could name up to five adults and if all had done so, the Learning Web sample would have named 55, the Idyllic Foundation sample 65, and the Comparison group 70. In fact, the Learning Web group named 48, or 87% of the possible total; the Idyllic Foundation group named 58, or 89%; and the Comparison group named 54, or 77%.

Because we had a comparison group, not a true control group, the difference is only suggestive, but it is fascinating that the Learning Web respondents named seven adults associated with the program as being important to them and the Idyllic Foundation respondents also named seven adults associated with that program. (Three participants in each program named one adult connected with the program as being important to them. Two in each named two program-related adults.) If those seven adults are subtracted from the totals for each program's participants, the number of adults mentioned as a percentage of the number they were asked to name drops to 74% for the Learning Web and 78% for the Idyllic Foundation, both in the same range as the Comparison group's 77%. the adults connected with the Learning Web and Idyllic Foundations who were mentioned by participants as being important to them, in other words, accounted for the larger number of important adults named by program participants in comparison to nonparticipants. (These data are summarized in Table One.)

---Table One about here---

The second source of hints regarding the programs' effects on adolescents was parents' responses to interview questions. The interview was designed to elicit parents' ratings of their children's behavior in such matters as ability to get along with people who are different and willingness to help others, areas identified by such writers as Coleman (Panel on Youth, 1974) and Newman (1975) as appropriate aims for the kinds of programs I have called community action learning programs. This effort to identify changes in behavior that might have resulted from program participation was unrewarded. Parents tended to place their children at the upper end of the rating scale and to say that they had always been that way. Any recent changes were attributed to maturation, not participation in the program. In contrast, teachers, who were asked to rate the same young people on the same scale, revealed little knowledge of their students' behavior outside of the classroom and tended to give ratings that did not differentiate among different behaviors. Neither group's ratings suggested that his was a useful approach.

However, after the parents had declared that they saw no changes in their children's behavior in the areas we identified, they went on to praise the programs extravagently when asked, "How do you feel about the Learning Web/Idyllic Foundation?" and "Has it done anything for your child?" Parents of 22 participants were interviewed. All were positive about the programs and their influence. Since this part of the interview was open-ended, a precise tabulation of responses is not possible, but, classifying the first and second reasons offered by each parent for approving of the programs yields a total of 9 of the 22 parents who emphasized general attitude changes they saw in their children and attributed to the programs (5 Idyllic Foundation, 4 Learning Web) and 6 parents who described the programs as being good learning opportunities without citing observable changes in their children as a consequence of their participation (2 Idyllic Foundation, 4 Learning Web). Comments from the remaining 7 parents were classified as indicating a belief that the programs were generally good and good for their children (4), that they provided constructive activities, "something to do" (1), and that the participants gained knowledge and skills (1).

The parents' evaluations, in other words, were not based on their perceptions that participation had affected their children's behavior in the ways we had predicted, but on their perceptions that attitudes had been changed and that the programs presented worthwhile opportunities, though the results might not be evident. The category of attitude change, however, includes some changes that parents believed were extremely important, in part because they believed their children might have suffered if they had not been able to participate in the programs. A few brief quotations will illustrate how important some of the parents thought the programs were.

> It's gotten "Roger" involved with kids his own age in a happy situation instead of a pressure situation. He's beginning to be able to express himself with other people.
>
> At one important point in that young lady's life, the Learning Web was critical to her. I think it gave her a tremendous amount of confidence in herself and once having such co fidence she was able to cope with almost anything else.
>
> I think it's the most wonderful thing that could have happened to him. It's conceivable that a good part of what he does in the future may be a result of his having developed skills (as an apprentice).
>
> She has gained experience which can only come through work and only comes through the responsibility that one has of delivering a service or a product where failure is very obvious and if it happens you can't chalk it up as just an unnecessary thing, like a paper in class or an exam.
>
> It kept her in school. She wouldn't be in school today if there hadn't been that alternative.

The parents' assessments of the programs reveal both a wide range of perceived effects -- greater self-confidence, an outlet for creative expression, a new sense of direction, a satisfying experience to compensate for the disappointments of school -- and a close match between what the programs had to offer and the particular needs of different adolescents. This suggestion that programs such as these can meet a variety of needs simultaneously is noteworthy because the goal of meeting the individual needs of students is widely espoused but little practiced in schools.

In summary, my exploratory study of two community action learning programs was not refined enough to identify different effects associated with the different approaches they represented, one placing adolescents in one-to-one relations with adults in adult-dominated settings and the other placing adolescents in a group setting with other adolescents where they planned and conducted their own activities. But the study suggests that both kinds of programs may succeed in putting adolescents in closer touch with adults in roles other than teacher and parent, though the effects of those relationships are not clear. Although the effects of participation in the programs appear to vary considerably among participants, there may be some uniformity of effects in the realm of attitudes.

Research on Unpaid Experience in Workplaces

Experience-Based Career Education (EBCE) and Executive High School Intern Programs (EHSIP) place adolescents in work settings without pay for extended periods of time. Students enrolled in EBCE may spend as much as 80% of their school time in a series of workplaces over a year or more. EHSIP students typically spend four days on site and one day in a seminar for a full semester. As its name states, EHSIP places students as assistants to executives. EBCE provides placements at many levels of the occupational hierarchy.

Developed by the National Institute of Education through four regional educational laboratories, EBCE has been extensively evaluated. EHSIP began in New York City and was then disseminated widely by its entrepreneurial originator. It has been evaluated by the National Center for Research in Vocational Education (Crowe and Walker, 1977). These studies have yielded findings that are consistent with those from the Learning Web and Idyllic Foundation. Bucknam (1976), summarizing the results of EBCE evaluations, made three points: 1) students, parents, and adults associated with the program all support it strongly; 2) participants' academic progress, as measured by standardized achievement tests, is not impaired by reduced time in class; and 3) there are some indications that the programs achieve their aims, but these are mixed. More bluntly, those involved

are enthusiastic, participants are not harmed academically, but positive program effects are unclear. Crowe and Walker (1977) also found high enthusiasm for EHSIP expressed by participants, their parents, and site sponsors. However, they expressed frustration at being unable to identify any clear program effects. They noted the wide variation in the experiences of participants and proposed a useful way of thinking about how those experiences are arranged. They described as "negotiation" the process by which participants find a role in their site that allows them to learn while contributing to the work of the organization. Because each placement is negotiated independently, with respect to a particular student and his or her place in a single site, extreme diversity results.

Osipow (1979), offering suggestions on the evaluation of experiential learning programs, pointed out that one consequence of such diversity can be that real effects of programs are obscured by the need to aggregate effects across individuals. Distinct changes in many different participants may cancel each other out when lumped together in a program evaluation. An example of this phenomenon that comes to mind is that one participant may be jarred out of an overly narrow career plan and begin thinking about a wider range of possible careers, while another may move from considering a diffuse collection of careers to a narrower range that allows realistic planning. Both will have made important progress in thinking about the future as a direct result of participating in unpaid work experience program, yet an instrument designed to assess the program's impact on the number of career choices being entertained by participants will, when the results are aggregated, show that the program had no effect on these two participants.

The Evaluation of Experiential Learning Project

Recalling the discussion above about the level of generality at which program effects are sought, we might avoid this problem by seeking more abstract effects, such as the kinds of attitude changes described by the parents of Learning Web and Idyllic Foundation parents. This is what Hedin and Conrad did in their evaluation of 28 experiential learning programs around the country, and their strategy worked beautifully. Part of that strategy

was to identify program effects that practitioners said were occurring rather than those theoreticians have said might result. They convened an advisory panel of directors from the 28 exemplary programs nominated for inclusion in the study and asked those directors what they saw happening to adolescents in their programs -- not what they wanted to see happen, but what they actually saw evidence for. These putative effects were then refined and operationalized and instruments designed to measure them were administered to participants in a pre-post design and in some cases to non-random comparison groups as well.

The effects they found in this way fell into three categories: 1) social development, including a) personal and social responsibility, b) attitudes toward others and toward community involvement, and c) career planning; 2) psychological development, a) general self-esteem and b) self-esteem in social situations; and 3) intellectual development and academic learning, specifically a) knowledge of community issues and resources and b) ability to solve problems. The investigators were interested not only in whether the programs as a group appeared to have a positive influence on participants in these areas but also in whether different types of programs -- they classified the 28 programs as community service, internships, political action, community study, or adventure education -- had different effects and whether different formats -- duration, number of hours per week, and the characteristics of individual experiences -- yielded different results.

According to two preliminary reports (Hedin, 1980; Hedin & Conrad, 1980), the programs do, in general, have positive effects in the areas investigated and there are systematic differences among programs. Participants in 21 programs showed an increase in personal and social responsibility. Scores on the responsibility measure increased for only one comparison group and declined for the other six. Participants in 22 of the 28 programs gained more positive attitudes toward adults in general, while responses to the same instrument showed more negative attitudes in six of seven comparison groups. Participants also rated the kinds of adults with whom they came into contact higher after having been in the programs than before. Scores on the Career Exploration Scale

increased in all but one of the programs and in the comparison groups, but participants showed greater gains. The difference was found to be mostly in items related to actual exploration in career settings, not in those items having to do with career knowledge. Interestingly, gains in the career scale were equal in programs focussed on career exploration and those not stressing careers.

With respect to psychoiogical development, respondents in the comparison groups and in 24 of the programs gained in both general self-esteem and self-esteem in social situations, but participants gained more than nonparticipants. Problem-solving ability was the only aspect of intellectual development for which results are reported, and participants in 18 programs demonstrated gains in this area, in contrast to no gains in the comparison groups. In the post-test, participants in these 18 programs showed greater empathy and increased complexity in their responses to a hypothetical dilemma. One of Hedin and Conrad's most useful findings was that these programs placed adolescents in helping roles and involved them in seminars where they could reflect actively on their experiences.

Hedin concludes that this opportunity for reflection is one of the key features of the programs they evaluated. The second, she says, is that the activities are important to the adolescents and give them an opportunity to exercise autonomy. Autonomy was particularly important for participants who were more successful in school. Low-income adolescents whose school experiences had not been positive and who participated in CETA-funded programs included in the study were less concerned with having adult responsibilities and more concerned about being given clear direction and being able to get help when they needed it.

Conrad and Hedin (1980) have noted the limitations of paper-and-pencil measures, and they expect to report findings from the observations of parents, teachers, and community supervisors, student journals, case studies of programs and participants, and from a range of unobtrusive measures. If these sources of data confirm the findings from paper-and-pencil measures, they will strengthen the findings reported thus far and substantiate the future use of the paper-and-pencil measures.

The authors also acknowledge that these findings may not be generalizable to less exemplary programs. Even within the select group of programs involved in the study there were some that did not seem as potent as others. It would be unwise to attribute to all commmunity action learning programs results found in the very best. The ultimate test of the value of programs like these is in their impact on adolescents' development into competent, productive, and satisfied adults. Only long-term longitudinal studies following participants and comparable nonparticipants into adulthood and assessing career achievements and citizenship activities could demonstrate these kinds of effects convincingly. Such research is notoriously difficult and may never be done.

Conclusions

In the meantime, Hedin and Conrad have given us evidence on which to base hope that some of the high expectations for community action learning programs may be fulfilled. In addition to the caveats stated above about that evidence, we must keep in mind that they found clear differences among the types of programs they evaluated with respect to the outcomes of interest. We cannot, therefore, continue to promote the general idea of adolescent involvement in the community as a learning experience, as the blue ribbon panels of the '70's have done. We must be specific about what kinds of programs are recommended in connection with what educational objectives. Secondly, we must recognize the need to develop a pedagogy of community action learning, a set of principles and standards for evaluating plans and programs and for training those who direct them. Community action learning is not a magical approach that works equally well in all circumstances. It is considerably less "teacher proof" than any conventional curriculum package.

In the context of this symposium, the evidence that community experiences can make a substantial contribution to adolescents' learning and development is particularly important, given the limitations that Greenberger and Steinberg have found in the educational value of paid part-time employment. As they note, there has been a good deal of rhapsodizing

over the value of work by people who have not looked closely at the kinds of jobs adolescents are paid to do. Unpaid involvement in the community appears to offer many of the opportunities for interacting with others, gaining knowledge and skills, developing more mature attitudes, and accomplishing worthwhile objectives that most youth jobs lack.

Just as community action learning can complement paid employment, it should be viewed as complementary rather than a replacement for classroom learning. The classroom is ideally suited to many educational purposes. Especially when the best practices of teachers and educational researchers are brought to bear, classrooms can be quite effective at imparting essential knowledge and academic skills. They are not very effective at giving adolescents a sense of how the world works and how they fit into it, which I would say is what community action learning programs do best. The complete secondary education should include classroom instruction, community action learning, and paid employment.

I shall close with a postscript about disadvantaged youth. There is a danger that the wholly correct concentration of federally subsidized employment programs for adolescents on the disadvantaged will result in giving low-income adolescents nothing better than uninspiring experience in their communities. Even the rather mindless jobs that suburban adolescents find on their own can look pretty good in contrast to some of the work available to poor adolescents in government programs. It should be possible for poor and minority adolescents to participate in community action learning programs as volunteers and, when necessary, they should receive stipends for participating in the same kinds of programs middle class adolescents do voluntarily or for credit. Otherwise, the hoped-for proliferation of community action learning programs will simply give middle-class adolescents one more advantage over low-income and minority adolescents.

	Sample Size (n)	Possible Number of Important Adults (5 x n)	Actual Number Mentioned	Percentage (Actual/ possible)	Percentage Excluding Program-Related Adults
Learning Web	11	55	48	87%	74%
Idyllic Foundation	13	65	58	89%	78%
Comparison Group	14	70	54	77%	77%

Table One

Responses to the question, "Who are the five most important adults in your life?"

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